GRASPED BY THE POWER OF LOVE
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Psalm 29
Isaiah 43:1–7
Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

"Do not fear . . .;
I have called you by name, you are mine."
Isaiah 43:1 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our hearts and minds to your word and to the very good news that you love us, and call us by name, and that we belong to you forever in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Skimming through the *Tribune* last Tuesday morning, my eye was caught by this peculiar headline in the "Tempo" section: "Grandma? Please Call Her Moogie." What grandparent could resist that? So on I read.

Senior *Tribune* correspondent Ellen Warren explained that as baby boomers become grandparents, they are looking for alternate names, a "semantic revolution to avoid the traditional labels of senior citizen status." Boomers want a younger name than Grandma and Granddad. Warren interviewed Nora Burch, who calls herself a "Name Nerd" and who has done exhaustive research on alternate grandparent names, which she is happy to share on her website www.namenerds.com.

When Ms. Burch's own mother became a grandparent, she wanted nothing to do with the conventional image of a "blue-haired granny playing bingo and driving a giant Oldsmobile," so she chose Moogie—which some of you may recognize as the term for mother in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (at this point I am way beyond my own personal knowledge or experience—but this is leading somewhere, I promise).

So here are some alternate grandparent names Ms. Burch has discovered: Zsa Zsa, Pitty-Pat, Marnie, Muna, Minnow, Muffer, Mima, FaFa, LaLa, Chippy, Cappy, Gankie, Ging-ging, Dappy, Boo-Boo, Blah-blah, Bubba, Boowa, Koko, and Dodo.

There are many, many more. This phenomenon knows no social class or status. President Bush's daughters, Jenna and Barbara, call their grandparents, the former President and First Lady, Gammy and Gampy.

I was comforted by that. I used to view the whole matter with disdain. When friends of mine started becoming grandparents and were called these peculiar names, I thought, “How pathetic.” And then I learned something. I became a grandparent, and, in fact, Nora Burch has it wrong. You don’t get to choose your name; you get a name when it pops out of the mouth of your first grandchild, and it is almost never a perfectly articulated “Grandmother” or “Grandfather.” Furthermore, you accept it and love it. It is a gift. It is precious no matter how silly it sounds to others. It is your name, given by one who loves you; spoken by one who really doesn’t know you very well but loves you nevertheless—not because you’ve done much or been much to this little one, but simply because you are you—loves you unconditionally, it seems, no strings attached.

So, you are given a name as a symbol of love, and you not only accept it, you treasure it. And no, I’m not telling mine.

Names are important. They tell you who you are and whose you are. Significantly, even people who say they hate their name, at some level, deep in their heart, are proud of the name they were given, love their name. A name tells you who you are—and whose you are.

> Do not fear, for I have redeemed you:
> I have called you by name, you are mine.

That’s the prophet Isaiah, writing a letter 2,600 years ago to a community of people living in exile, miles from their home, defeated, their beloved city burned to the ground, their very existence in danger, not even sure who they were any longer.

> But now thus says the Lord . . .:
> Do not fear . . .; I have called you by name, you are mine
> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; . . .
> When you walk through fire you shall not be burned.

Fire, water: symbols of everything that threatens, symbols of chaos, destructiveness, death itself—Do not be afraid, I have called you by name, you are mine.

Names are important. They tell us who we are and whose we are.

Every month in the life of this church we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism. We Presbyterians insist that it be done in the midst of public worship and not privately because it is so central to who we are.

It is a public naming.

“Lauren Christine, Elizabeth Blair,” the minister says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” says a name out loud, and that’s who you are, and then, “Lauren, Elizabeth, you are a child of God; you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” That’s whose you are.

And then we all remember who we are and whose as we remember our own baptism.

When he was about thirty years old, Jesus of Nazareth was baptized. We know virtually nothing about Jesus from infancy until he is thirty other than one isolated incident when he was about twelve and his parents took him to Jerusalem for the Passover. His story, the story of his ministry, actually begins on the day he walks out of Nazareth, away from his father’s carpenter shop, a few miles out into the countryside to hear a preacher by the name of John, actually a distant relative of his. John’s oratory is fiery and compelling, like the legendary prophets, Amos, Micah. His message is strong: repent, turn around, devote yourself wholly to God, begin a new life, walk into the river and be baptized, let the waters wash the old away, emerge a new person. I love to ponder the literary history of stories like this. How did it get into the New Testament? There were no disciples yet to see it and remember it. The only other witness we know was there was John the Baptist himself, and John will be imprisoned and executed by King Herod in the very near future.

So it’s in there, I conclude, because Jesus remembered and told his disciples about it and the story was passed along until Mark, Matthew, and Luke wrote it down. It’s in there because it was so important to Jesus himself, the day he was given a name and told to whom he belonged. It’s always difficult to explain our deepest, most profound, most personal religious experience. So I’ve always imagined Jesus telling it something like this: Someone had asked him how it had all begun. Where did this journey start? And he must have said something like, “So there I was, standing in the crowd, listening to John, and all of a sudden my whole life passed in front of my eyes, all thirty years of it, and I was filled with a sense of anxiety and anticipation and expectation and I knew I was at a turning point, that I had to decide now what to do with the rest of my life. So for some reason I found myself walking into that river and asking John to baptize me, and he did, pushed me under the water and pulled me back up, and as I stood there a little embarrassed, feeling foolish, soaking wet, water running down my face, tears suddenly came, and it was as if the sky opened and God’s Spirit —almost like a dove—came down and I heard a voice addressing me, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’”

It was Jesus' conversion experience, the day he knew who he was and decided what to do next, the day he learned who he was and whose he was: "My Son, my child, the Beloved."

In a wonderful new book, *Credo*, a collection of vignettes from the ministry of William Sloane Coffin, there is this:

> What is faith? Faith is being grasped by the power of love. Faith is recognizing that what makes God is infinite mercy, not infinite control; not power but love unending.

The story of Jesus begins on the day he is grasped by the power of love, the day he knows who he is and whose he is, the day when, in Isaiah's unforgettable image, he knows deeply in his soul that he has nothing to fear, not even death itself, because God has called him by name—"the Beloved Son"—because he belongs to God.

And so Christian faith begins in the human heart when we know that we are loved by God, not, as we think mostly, as we consider a list of intellectual propositions, analyze them objectively, turn them over in our minds, measure them against other propositions (there is a God, there is no God; Jesus was God, Jesus was a good man; love is stronger than hate, hate seems to be wining; there is nothing to fear, there seems to be a lot to fear). Faith begins not when we decide what intellectual propositions are true for us, but when and as we know ourselves gripped by the power of love. Christian faith begins not on the day we decide to adopt a new set of rules for living, a new ethic, a new list of sins to avoid, but on the day we know who we are and whose we are: "child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ forever."

Author Anne Lamott returned to Christian faith and the church, a little Presbyterian congregation in Marin City, California, after a very difficult and troubled life. She tells the story of her conversion in her wonderful book *Traveling Mercies*. Lamott is an unapologetic Christian, but she has lost neither her irreverence nor her sense of the outrageous nor her salty language, and she is a bit of an anomaly to both liberals and evangelicals, which makes her compelling to everyone. She was interviewed recently in an evangelical magazine about her conversion. She said,

> I try to share my resurrection story with people in the hopes that some of them who have left churches or who have been kicked out because of their beliefs or sexual orientation will find something in my words or humor that makes church safe for them again. . . .
>
> I never said I am a good Christian. I just know that Jesus adores me and is only as far away as his name. I say, "Hi, Lord," and he says,

> “Hello, Darling.” He loves me so much he keeps a photo of me in his wallet. If I were the only person on earth, he still would have died for me.

One of the great saints of the Presbyterian church, Howard Rice, Professor of Theology, Moderator of the General Assembly, said the same thing a little more elegantly:

> The heart of the experience of God is an inner knowing that I am loved, loved beyond my comprehension, beyond my earning or deserving.

And then the professor elaborates:

> God is love. The experience of God’s love is one that meets our basic need for love so that we can be free to love others. Spiritual experience is the liberation of the self from preoccupation with itself. It is the beginning of freedom to care about others with abandon. (*Reformed Spirituality*, pp. 164–66)

That’s what happened to Jesus one day, standing in the water of the river. He knew who he was: child of God, the Beloved, and whose he was forever. And it freed him to love with abandon, to live out his life loving his friends, his people, all he touched.

That’s why they followed him, I believe. Nondescript poor people, peasants, fishermen, tax collectors, sinners—people about whom no one ever said a good word. He gave them a new name, a new dignity: child of God, you belong to me forever.

Gripped by the power of God’s love, he and they lived and died without fear.

> Do not fear . . .;
> I have called you by name, you are mine.

I attended a meeting recently of pastors of Presbyterian congregations like this one. We know one another, some better than others. So the meeting began as most meetings like that do, with a time of sharing and telling what’s been going on in your life and work. It’s a time to brag a little—or complain. A very good friend of mine, John Galloway, pastor of the Wayne, Pennsylvania, Presbyterian Church, stunned us all by announcing that his wife, Susan, died just a few weeks earlier. I was one of the ones who knew Susan, lively, bright, great mother and professional. We knew Susan was sick with ALS, but I, for one, had not heard this news. John said that her body had deteriorated slowly, inexorably, but not her spirit—not ever. Near the end, when she was paralyzed completely, unable to speak,

communicating by typing with one finger on her computer, their friends decided to have a party, which they did. They ate and drank and told stories and laughed and cried and each person said what they wanted to say to Susan and about Susan. At the end of the evening, before her guests left, she typed on her computer screen so they all could read:

> This has been the best year of my life . . . to know how much you are loved.

And I thought, “John, that’s the gospel. That’s the best sermon you ever preached. The best sermon I ever heard.”

> Faith is being grasped by the power of love.
>
> It is knowing who you are and whose you are.
>
> It is to be free to love with abandon.
>
> And, it is to be afraid of nothing: not fire, not water, nothing—not even death itself.

At the very darkest and lowest points of his life, and there were many of them, Martin Luther used to write on his slate two Latin words:

> *Baptizatus Sum*
>
> I am baptized. I know who I am and whose I am.

It was done for many of us before we were even aware of it: carried to the front of the church, held in parents’ arms, water spilled over our heads.

John, Sue, Robert, Mary, Linda, Michael, you are a child of God and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.

And even if you are not baptized, it is for you—it is for everyone—to have, to know, to treasure, and to live.

> To love with abandon
> and to fear nothing, ever again.
>
> Do not fear . . .;
> I have called you by name, you are mine.

Thanks be to God.